

‘Within it lie ancient melodies’: Locating Dowland’s Musical Rhetoric in Britten’s *Songs from the Chinese*

Much has been written about the influence Henry Purcell (1659-1695) has had on Benjamin Britten’s vocal music. There is no doubt that the Baroque composer’s innate gift for setting the English language had a profound effect on Britten for whom the voice played such a central role. Britten’s affiliation with the early master can be seen in the idiosyncratic realizations he made of several of Purcell’s compositions, from *Dido and Aeneas* and other stage works to numerous songs. Reconstructions of the latter, for voice and piano, have often been dismissed by contemporary musicologists and early-music specialists as anachronistic and lacking in authenticity – their dramatic character and distinctive harmony illustrate Britten’s imprint as much as they do Purcell’s. They do point, however, to an extraordinary symbiosis of the two composers’ compositional styles and expose the deep association Britten felt with Purcell.

Similar claims have been made for Britten’s affiliation with John Dowland (1563-1626), though these have largely centred on his use of selected lute-songs as a basis for variation. However, Dowland’s influence on Britten in terms of compositional procedure has not been sufficiently examined. Focusing on the song cycle for tenor and guitar, *Songs from the Chinese*, op. 58, this paper argues for the first time that Britten assimilated Dowland’s virtuosity in musical rhetoric so acutely and instinctively that it became an inherent aspect of his compositional technique.

As a young composer, Britten’s diary entries graphically highlight his refusal to accept the type of ‘English’ music that was much in vogue at the time. He strongly opposed Vaughan Williams’s (1872-1958) determination to forge a national tradition of art music bound to and developed from English folk song.¹ Britten opposed this development for two reasons. Firstly, under the influence of the left-wing W.H. Auden (1907-1973), he was uncomfortable with the rhetoric around folk-based art music that linked it to a belief in a particular sort of English identity, which was sometimes accompanied by notions of English racial superiority over other groups.² Secondly, he was unwilling to accept the limitation of using modal material as the sole basis for composition. Britten, therefore, consciously drew his influences from

¹ On 28 December 1934, Britten wrote in his diary: ‘Job of Vaughan Williams seemed interminable. There are some nice things in it if you aren’t tired of folk song modalism – but most of it is heavy, dull, imitative & amateurish...It is concerts like this which make me absolutely despair of English Music and its critics.’ John Evans, ed., *Journeying Boy: The Diaries of the Young Benjamin Britten 1928-1938* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), p. 240.

² Certain statements made by those such as folk-song collector Cecil Sharp (1859-1934), composer Hubert Parry (1848-1918) and Vaughan Williams resonated strongly with arguments put forward by extreme nationalist movements that were gaining political ground throughout Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century. Sharp’s comments that ‘the primary purpose of education is to place the children of the present generation in possession of the cultural achievements of the past so that they may as quickly as possible enter into their racial inheritance, what better form of music or of literature can we give them than the folk-songs and folk-ballads of the race to which they belong...’ could conveniently be misconstrued or legitimized for political ends, dubious or benign. Quoted in *Introduction to English Folk Songs from the Appalachians*, collected by Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil J. Sharp, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s & Sons, 1917), xx.

cosmopolitan sources, largely circumventing the *Pastoral School* headed by Vaughan Williams, and sought to redefine English music by connecting with the great English composers of the past. The genius of Dowland and Purcell as song composers positioned them as perfect models, and indeed, Britten's frequent reference to their music is evidence of his determined attempts to place himself as a natural inheritor of that vocal tradition:

One of my chief aims is to try and restore to the musical setting of the English language a brilliance, freedom and vitality that have been curiously rare since the days of Purcell.³

It is true that, in England, song composition declined after the death of Purcell. The overwhelming success of Handel's oratorios and operas had a debilitating impact on the more intimate song genre. All over Europe, the phenomenon of the public concert, the erection of larger concert halls and technical developments in instrumental construction brought the symphony and concerto to the fore. As a result, song was increasingly confined to the drawing room and the salon – a practice, which, in Viennese society, reached its apogee in the celebrated *Schubertiads*. There were in England, however, no home-grown composers of Schubert's standing, and it was not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that song made something of a comeback with composers such as Frederick Delius (1862-1934), Arnold Bax (1883-1953) and John Ireland (1879-1962), and with the folk-song revival headed by Vaughan Williams. Britten, however, wanting to circumvent both impressionistic, pastoral idylls and folk-based art songs, consciously attempted to forge a connection between his own work and the exemplary music of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. It is clear that he considered himself to be the heir of that tradition and the one most able to rebut the accusation that England was 'Das Land ohne Musik'.⁴

In this paper I wish to focus on Britten's kinship with John Dowland. The thematic connection is clear: the songs *If My Complaints Could Passions Move* and *Flow My Tears* are used in Britten's *Lachrymae, Reflections on a Song of John Dowland*, op. 48, for viola and piano, while *Come Heavy Sleep* forms the theme for his guitar variations – *Nocturnal, after John Dowland*, op. 70. A mutual fascination both composers shared with death, dreams and sleep, further enhances these thematic relationships. Indeed, Britten's life-long obsession with melancholia and darkness positions him as the twentieth-century composer most likely to embody the mentality of the Elizabethan period and what John Donne (1572-1631) described as its 'extraordinary sadness...predominant melancholy...faintnesse of heart...chearlesnesse, [and]...joylesnesse of spirit.'⁵ Britten was intimate with all of Dowland's lute songs and consort music; both he and the tenor Peter Pears (1910-1986) were

³ Benjamin Britten, Preface to *Peter Grimes*, cited in Boris Ford, ed., *Benjamin Britten's Poets: The Poetry He Set to Music* (Manchester: Carcarnet Press, 1994) xi.

⁴ *Das Land ohne Musik* (The Land Without Music) was the title of a book published in 1904 by the German author and philosopher Oskar Adolf Hermann Schmitz (1873-1931). A barely concealed declaration of Germany's cultural superiority, it reinforced a perception of England that held sway in many parts of Europe during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Such as they were, English sensitivities were slowly relieved by the emergence of strong musical voices at the end of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth.

⁵ Peter Holman, *Dowland Lachrymae (1604)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 50.

largely responsible for reviving interest in his music. Such was Britten's advocacy that, in 1963, he devoted the Aldeburgh Festival to the four-hundredth anniversary of Dowland's birth. The duo partnership Peter Pears had with guitarist and lutenist Julian Bream (b. 1933) was the first to reintroduce Dowland to the British and international stages from the early 1950s onwards. Despite a performing style that would by contemporary performance practice be considered anachronistic, this concerted effort to present Dowland to the world must be deemed to be of central importance to the rejuvenation of interest not just in Dowland but in a great deal of Elizabethan music.

Tellingly, Britten returned to Dowland in the last year of his life when, close to death, he composed a version of his *Lachrymae* with a realization for string orchestra accompaniment – it was the last piece he worked on. This clearly demonstrates that Dowland was a perennial presence for Britten. He not only provided him with extraordinary examples of English settings in a genre, the lute song, which offered a powerful outlet for deeply expressive musical gestures, but he also embodied a figure with whom Britten could feel an emotional and psychological connection. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Britten should imbue his work with the musical essence of what was a compositional godfather figure.

The title of this paper is taken from the second of six Chinese poems translated by Arthur Waley that Britten set for his 1957 song cycle, *Songs from the Chinese*, which he wrote for Pears and Bream, and which was premiered at the Aldeburgh Festival in Great Glemham House on 17 of June 1958. Written by Po Chü-I (772-846), the poem, entitled *The Old Lute*, opens with the lines:

Of chord and cassiawood is the lute compounded;
Within it lie ancient melodies.⁶

The lute was rarely absent from Britten's consciousness, and this line in particular must have resonated with him, calling to mind Dowland's 'ancient melodies', which haunted him so much. Whether Britten was aware of it or not, it was through the expert practice of musical rhetoric that Dowland was able to make his lute songs so expressive and affecting. Traditionally, the art of rhetoric was divided into five areas: *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio* (or *decorativo*), *memoria*, and *pronunciatio*. *Inventio* was the discovery of the material to be used. *Dispositio* was concerned with the arrangement of that material. *Elocutio* was the embellishment, amplification and decoration of the text with exemplary words and sentences. The resulting discourse was then memorized (*memoria*) and delivered orally (*pronunciatio*). The Classical age's reverence for Orpheus as the ultimate poet and musician led to the belief that music was a powerful tool of communication and could arouse any emotion in its listeners. For musicians of the Renaissance and Baroque, the use of musical rhetoric allowed them to identify the emotional content represented by a given text and to communicate that to an audience. The composer and poet, Thomas Campion (1567-1620), makes this clear when he says:

⁶ Arthur Waley, *Chinese Poems* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1946). All the chosen poems set in *Songs from the Chinese* are taken from these translations.

Happy is hee whose words can move,
Yet sweet Notes help perswasion.
Mixe your words with Musicke then,
That they the more may enter.⁷

Only by strict adherence to the laws of rhetoric, it was widely believed, could an aesthetic excitation and direct communication be achieved. Music could not automatically ‘speak for itself’, but rather, it needed to be imbued, as the lutenist Thomas Mace (1612?-1706?) suggested, with a variety of elements that fully expressed the intentions inherent in its construction:

There is in Musick...such a wonderful-various-way of Expression, even as in Language, Unbounded, and Unlimited; and we may as properly, and as Aptly take a Subject Matter to Discourse upon...and show as much Wit, and Variety, as can the Best Orator, in the way of Oratory: And I would, that this were better known, and more put into Practice...⁸

Dowland reacted to the rhetoric of the language in his chosen texts by composing musical settings constructed with potent musical rhetoric. Indeed, he was renowned for his skill in this regard: the poet and writer, Henry Peacham the Younger (1576-1643), referred to ‘Master Doctor Douland’ as ‘inferior to none in the world...for depth of skill and richness of concept’.⁹ Dowland augmented texts with a diversity of musical *figurae*, transforming the whole into what would have been then called ‘eloquent song’. Even when texts were not extraordinary in themselves, composers made musical embellishments to transform them into songs through which performers, with the help of these *figurae*, could move their listeners to specific passions. Indeed, it was often the case that simple, stylised texts allowed for greater rhetorical expansion by the composer. These texts followed a pattern of established literary code in which emotions were expressed in well-known formulae.

Dowland’s *Come Heavy Sleep* is a perfect example of this; a closer look at the song will illustrate how he employed his skills in musical rhetoric to great effect.

Come heavy sleep, the image of true death;
and close up these my weary weeping eies:
Whose spring of tears doth stop my vitall breath,
and tears my hart with sorrows sign swoln cries:
Com and possess my tired thoughts, worne soule,
That living dies, till thou on me be stoule.

Come Heavy Sleep is the twentieth and last song from Dowland’s *The First Booke of Songs or Ayres* (1597). It is not surprising that he kept it for the end,

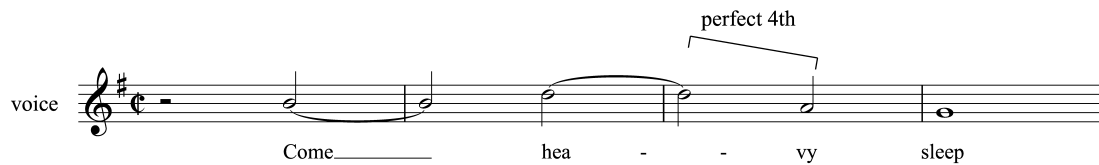
⁷ Thomas Campion, *The Description of a Maske...At the Marriage of the Right Honourable the Earl of Somerset*, London, 1614, in Robert Toft, *Tune Thy Musicke To Thy Hart: The Art of Eloquent Singing in England 1597-1622* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1993), 4.

⁸ Judy Tarling, *The Weapons of Rhetoric: A Guide for Musicians and Audiences* (Hertfordshire: Corda Music, 2004), 105.

⁹ Henry Peacham the Younger, *The Compleat Gentleman*, London 1622 (facsimile Amsterdam 1968), cited in Robert Toft, *Tune Thy Musicke To Thy Hart: The Art of Eloquent Singing in England 1597-1622* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1993), 12.

as it is among the finest in the set: its plea for release through sleep from the toils of life is expertly elaborated melodically and harmonically. As noted, the anonymous text deals with its theme in quite a simple and stylized manner. This type of writing was suitable for Dowland's purposes, as his primary concern was not with the communication of ideas, but of emotions. The point can be observed in the opening phrase, 'Come heavy sleep', where the sheer weight of the word 'heavy' is expressed musically by the falling perfect 4th on its second syllable.

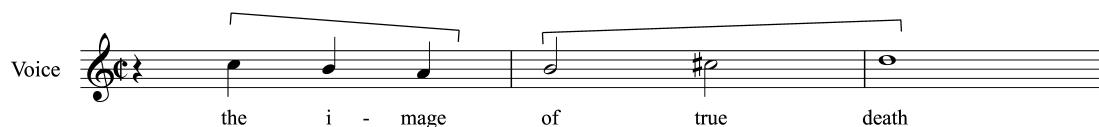
Ex. 1: Dowland, *Come Heavy Sleep*



The descending 4th provides a musical correlation to the text, further augmented by the fact that many numerologists of the period believed that the interval of the perfect 4th equated to weakness, indecision and ambivalence.

Other cases of Dowland's musical rhetoric in this song are worth exploring. For example, the use of mirror notation to underscore the words 'the image of true death', where the three descending notes and their pitch relationships (semitone/tone) corresponding to 'the i-mage' are quite literally mirrored by the inverted three ascending notes attached to 'of true death' (tone/semitone). The longer note values that correlate to 'of true death' emphasize the longing for death.

Ex. 2: Dowland, *Come Heavy Sleep*



A leading lute-song composer of the time, Thomas Morley (1558?-1602), asserted that:

you must have a care that when your matter signifieth 'ascending', 'high', 'heaven', and such like you make your music ascend; and by the contrary where your ditty speaketh of 'descending', 'lowness', 'depth', 'hell', and others such, you must make your music descend'¹⁰

Morley's instructions are adhered to in Dowland's shaping of melodic contours to musically amplify the text's meanings. Thus, the words 'And close up' are reflected by four ascending notes, the final one of which floats on the word 'up' for a considerable period, thereby figuratively accentuating its meaning. Meanwhile, the stolid alliteration of 'weary weeping eies' is reflected

¹⁰ Morley, *A Plain and Easy Introduction*, ed. Harman, 290-1, cited in Peter Holman, *Dowland Lachrimae (1604)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 43.

in the steady, evenly descending notes, which are laid to rest on the word 'eies', like eyelids drowsily closing:

Ex. 3: Dowland, *Come Heavy Sleep*

A rhythmic and harmonic language of heightened and focused emotional intensity is effectively created with the sudden shift Dowland makes on the words 'Come and possess'. Rhythmically, the minim/quaver/quaver/crotchet motif not only mimics the words as they would be spoken, but also suggests that the plunge down to the F# is a plunge to the grave.

Ex. 4: Dowland, *Come Heavy Sleep*

The last word of 'sorrows sigh swoln cries' ends on a G major chord, which on the lute is played mostly with the open resonating strings. This extra resonance will support an intense, anguished cry from the singer. The sudden shift to B major for the next line 'Come and possess' is more muted as this chord is executed by playing stopped strings. The singer is almost compelled, therefore, to drop the voice so that 'the invocation to sleep then take[s] on a kind of hushed urgency.'¹¹ The physical shift from a reverberating open chord of G major to a less resonant stopped chord of B major also had its harmonic implications. As Judy Tarling points out:

For some instruments certain keys are more comfortable to play in than others, and the effect of unequal tunings would oblige composers to select suitable keys for their players, according to whether a sweet or discordant affect was required. Some composers...compiled tables of keys and their likely affects.¹²

Among those composers were Marc-Antoine Charpentier (1643-1704), Johann Mattheson (1681-1764), Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) and Jean-Jacques

¹¹ Diane Poulton, *John Dowland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 241/2.

¹² Judy Tarling, *The Weapons of Rhetoric: A Guide for Musicians and Audiences* (Hertfordshire: Corda Music, 2004), 76.

Rousseau (1712-1778).¹³ By comparing their writings on the subject, it can be observed that invariably they affiliate G major with feelings of tenderness, persuasion and seriousness, while B major is understood to embody characteristics of harshness, offense, desperation and mournfulness. In this light, the vocal line in G major on the words ‘sorrows sigh swoln cries’ attempts to plead and persuade by supplication and acquiescence. The sudden shift to B major on the words ‘Come and possess’ is altogether more desperate, indicating the singer’s imperative demands, even if declaimed in a ‘hushed urgency’.

These are just a few examples of Dowland’s consummate use of musical rhetoric to amplify textual meanings. But where are these techniques located in Britten’s *Songs from the Chinese*? The first place to look is, not surprisingly, at the song that tells of the lute’s ‘ancient melodies’ – ‘The Old Lute’, the second in the cycle:

Of chord and cassiawood is the lute compounded;
 Within it lie ancient melodies.
 Ancient melodies - weak and savourless,
 Not appealing to present men’s taste.
 Light and colour are faded from the jade stops;
 Dust has covered the rose-red strings.
 Decay and ruin came to it long ago,
 But the sound that is left is still cold and clear.
 I do not refuse to play it, if you want me to;
 But even if I play people will not listen.

How did it come to be neglected so?
 Because of the Ch’i-ang flute and the zithern of Ch’in

The song is essentially constructed of five melodic fragments derived from the Lydian mode (starting on E), a favourite of Britten’s.

Ex. 5: Britten, ‘The Old Lute’, *Songs from the Chinese*,
 (polyphonic stratification)

The musical score for 'The Old Lute' is presented in a polyphonic format. It features five staves: a single staff for the voice and four staves for the guitar. The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#), and the time signature is 4/4. The voice part begins with a melodic line of quarter notes: E4, F#4, G#4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5. The guitar part is divided into four staves, each playing a different melodic fragment derived from the Lydian mode. The first guitar staff plays a sequence of quarter notes: E4, F#4, G#4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5. The second guitar staff plays a sequence of quarter notes: E4, F#4, G#4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5. The third guitar staff plays a sequence of quarter notes: E4, F#4, G#4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5. The fourth guitar staff plays a sequence of quarter notes: E4, F#4, G#4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5. The score illustrates the concept of polyphonic stratification, where multiple melodic lines are layered together to create a rich, textured sound.

This is clearly a reference to the lute-song genre and may well have been implanted to subliminally invoke Dowland’s lost lute-song world – an apt

¹³ Ibid., 77.

intervention in a song that is, at least on one level, about the loss of the lute as a fashionable instrument. In light of this, it is worth noting that the accompaniment supporting many of Dowland's lute songs does more than simply add harmonic foundation to the vocal part. It often weaves numerous contrapuntal lines that pre-empt, reiterate and interlace those of the voice. This is a feature that was clearly understood by Britten: it is specifically referred to by Pears in a programme note for the Dowland anniversary Aldeburgh Festival mentioned above:

In all these big songs of [Dowland] the voice is one of the strands of counterpoint – the most important – of which the song is made, and it is the job of the singer to find and reveal the shape of his line in relation to the other lines which Dowland so richly and inventively supplies to the lute, that instrument which being plucked has naturally a dying sound and is therefore not apt for sustained counterpoint.¹⁴

Therefore, Ex. 5 demonstrates Britten's reference to the musical construction of a lute song. The highly restricted nature of each modal fragment (the notes in brackets in Ex. 5 are only arrived at after some time) obviously creates a static harmonic environment that gives the song a deeply immanent character further highlighting the diminished status of the instrument in the Chinese poem.

There are two specific details here that show the characteristics of a musical rhetoric in action: the use of the Lydian mode and falling intervals. Composers of the Renaissance and Baroque periods utilized certain modes in order to create specific affects relating to the mood and character of a given work. Received opinion about mode affect dictated that, for example, the use of the Phrygian mode incited frenzy and inspired emotionally charged states. By the seventeenth century, this mode was thought to arouse the spirit aggressively and imbue the listener with courage and masculinity. The Lydian mode, however, was understood to have the opposite effect, encouraging gravity and solemnity, and was thought to infect the mind with a kind of ecstasy.¹⁵ In this respect, Britten's use of the Lydian mode for 'The Old Lute' suggests a musical rhetoric practice most appropriate to the solemn and sad nature of the words that speak of loss and decay.

¹⁴ Peter Pears, 'John Dowland', *The Sixteenth Aldeburgh Festival of Music and the Arts* (programme booklet), 27, cited in Graham Wade, *The Art of Julian Bream*, (Blaydon on Tyne: Ashley Mark Publishing Company, 2008), 74.

¹⁵ See Judy Tarling, *The Weapons of Rhetoric: A Guide for Musicians and Audiences* (Hertfordshire: Corda Music, 2004), 76.

Ex. 6: Britten, 'The Old Lute', *Songs from the Chinese*

The image shows six staves of musical notation for the song 'The Old Lute'. Each staff is labeled with a bar number and contains a line of lyrics. The music is in a key with four sharps (F#, C#, G#, D#) and a 3/4 time signature. Annotations above the notes indicate intervals: 'major 3rd.' and 'minor 3rd.'. The lyrics are: (an) - - - - - cient mel - o - dies; Not ap - peal - ing to pre - sent men's taste; Light and col - our are fad - ed from the jade stops; Dust has cov - ered the rose__ red__ strings; But the sound that is left is still cold_____ and clear; play peo - ple_____ will not list - en.

Next, recalling Morley's insistence that 'where your ditty speaketh of 'descending', "lowness", "depth", "hell", and others such, you must make your music descend', we can see how Britten follows such instruction in the constant falling of the vocal phrases. Ex. 6 demonstrates how numerous phrases in 'The Old Lute' fall at the end, almost always by a sad minor 3rd. The reiteration of falling intervals is a technique of musical rhetoric that subtly intimates the old lute's fall from grace and provides a sense of decay to each phrase apposite to the mood of the entire song.

Waley's translation separates the final two lines of the poem structurally, and Britten complies musically: the question, asked in a solo recitative at bar 28 – 'How did it come to be neglected so?' is answered (in bars 30 to the end) by a sudden change of tempo – 'Quick' (crochet = 104) – and a complete change of accompaniment. Where we previously had slow, lugubrious modal fragments, we now have fast, snappy arpeggios executed in harmonics, which reflect the perceived 'brash' quality of the new instruments: 'Because of the Ch'iang flute and the zithern of Ch'in.'

Ex. 7: Britten, 'The Old Lute', *Songs from the Chinese*, bars 30-34

The musical score shows the vocal line and guitar accompaniment for bars 30-34. The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps and a 2/4 time signature. The lyrics are: "Be - cause of the Ch'i-ang flute and the zi-thern of Ch'in". The guitar part is in treble clef with the same key signature and time signature, featuring a complex texture of triplets and sixteenth notes. The score is marked with *pp cresc.* and *ff*. A "rising minor 3rd." is indicated above the final notes of the vocal line.

This section is such a surprise that it conjures up the world of the new instruments, the sudden shift in society for which the fashion for these instruments is a powerful metaphor, and the dazzling confusion it induces in the old poet. The poet's world, which has been turned upside-down, is rhetorically captured by Britten when the previously falling minor 3^{rds} of the vocal line are literally turned upside-down by the new instruments, which now make the end of the phrase rise a minor 3rd. 'The Old Lute' is a short song of thirty-seven bars, but through its effective use of stratified polyphony it demonstrates how Britten successfully absorbed into his own language lute-song derivations and techniques of musical rhetoric typical of Dowland's music, thereby forming a synthesis of style and mood.

Another direct influence of Dowland can be observed in the cycle's opening song – 'The Big Chariot'. In the third stanza, Britten resorts to the repetition of certain word phrases. This technique of repetition is a major feature of musical rhetoric theory known as *epizeuxis (subjunctio)*.

Don't help on the big chariot;
 You will only make yourself dusty.
 Don't think about the sorrows of the world;
 You will only make yourself wretched.

Don't help on the big chariot;
 You won't be able to see for dust.
 Don't think about the sorrows of the world;
 You will never escape from your despair.

Don't help on the big chariot;
 You'll be stifled with dust.
 Don't think about the sorrows of the world;
 You will only load yourself with care.

As the writer and critic George Puttenham (1529-1590) asserts: 'the figure that worketh by iteration or repetition of one word or clause doth much alter and affect the eare and also the mynde of the hearer, and therefore is counted a very brave figure both with the Poets and the rhetoriciens.'¹⁶ There is little doubt that Britten's profound affiliation with Dowland directly influenced his

¹⁶ George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, London, 1589, edited by Ed Baxter Hathaway (Kent, 1970), cited in Robert Toft, *Tune Thy Musicke To Thy Hart: The Art of Eloquent Singing in England 1597-1622* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1993), 21.

compositional use of this technique. Dowland’s effective use of iteration to amplify sexual longing is one that, I would suggest, Britten understood intuitively. Its use creates great intensity, thus when words are repeated ‘the affect is amplified, useful both for “vehement” appeals and in a softer appeal for pity. The voice may appear to fail at peak volume through excess of strong emotion, as in Dowland’s sexually charged “to see, to heare, to touch, to die”.’¹⁷

Ex. 8: Dowland, *Come Again! Sweet Love Doth Now Invite*

Similarly, the repeat Britten employs at bars 28/29 (‘The big chariot, the big chariot’) emphasises the size and weight of the chariot, and consequently, the hardship it imposes. When he uses duplication in the phrase ‘You’ll be stifled with dust, be stifled with dust’ (bars 31/2), it gives the impression that the singer is running out of breath: the voice is so stifled by the obligation to articulate all the repeated words that the vocal line is forced to descend and diminuendo under the burden.

The specific use of repetition of the opening lines, ‘Don’t think about the sorrows of the world’, as they appear for the third time (that is, in the third verse) is directly influenced by Dowland’s use of the technique known in the art of rhetoric as *anadiplosis (reduplicatio)*. This is the repetition of the last word of one phrase at the beginning of the next. A perfect example can be found in Dowland’s *In Darkness Let Me Dwell*, where the lines:

The roofe Dispaire to barre all cheerfull light from mee
The wals of marble blacke that moistned still shall weepe

become:

The roofe Dispaire to barre all, all cheerfull light
from mee
The wals of marble blacke that moistned, that moistned
still shall weepe, still shall weepe

Similarly, from bar 35, Britten amplifies the essential theme of ‘The Big Chariot’ by an effective use of *anadiplosis*; though he applies the technique to a single line, the effect is exactly the same:

¹⁷ Judy Tarling, *The Weapons of Rhetoric: A Guide for Musicians and Audiences* (Hertfordshire: Corda Music, 2004), 224.

Ex. 10: Dowland, *Farewell Too Faire*

voice

se - cre - sie fare - well, fare - well.

Lute

Britten's use of *anadiplosis* can be observed again in the fifth song 'Depression'.

Turned to Jade are the boy's rosy cheeks;
 To his sick temples the frost of winter clings.
 Do not wonder that my body sinks to decay;
 Though my limbs are old, my heart is older yet.

The technique is utilized to transform:

Though my limbs are old, my heart is older yet.

to become:

Though my limbs are old, are old
 my heart is older, older, older, older yet.

Ex. 11: Britten, 'Depression', *Songs from the Chinese*, bars 9 to end

9

pp

Voice

Though my limbs are old, are old, my heart is older, er, old - er, old - er, old - er yet.

Guitar

pp

cresc.

12

mf dim.

mf dim.

pp

This technique very effectively amplifies the meaning in the text. However, a further device from the tool kit of musical rhetoric is simultaneously employed here that further invokes Dowland. The use of *synonymia* is the repetition of a musical fragment at different pitch levels.¹⁸ In his song *Behold A Wonder*

¹⁸ 'In the language arts, *synonymia* specifies a figure designed to make the sense stronger and more obvious by using words which differ from the preceding one in form or sound but which mean the same' - Robert Toft, *Tune Thy Musicke To Thy Hart: The Art of Eloquent Singing in England 1597-1622* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1993), 32.

Here, Dowland uses *synonymia* on the word ‘hundred’ to emphasize the length of time of love’s blindness. Britten similarly underscores time and age (see Ex. 11) in his use of *synonymia* on the word ‘older’ (bars 11/12) and the reiteration of the correlating accompanying fragments, thereby demonstrating that the two composers consistently share technical and thematic affinities.

Ex. 12: Dowland, *Behold A Wonder Here*

‘Dance Song’, the concluding song of the *Chinese* cycle, is a rather strange ceremonial poem also known as the ‘song of the lin hunter’: one commentator has suggested that the original poem is a hunting song written by Duke Lu Ai when he was given a *lin*.¹⁹ A *lin* is sometimes referred to as a giraffe, but in this context it really means the mythical *lin*, translated by Arthur Waley as a unicorn.

The unicorn’s hoofs!
The duke’s sons throng,
Alas for the unicorn!

The unicorn’s brow!
The duke’s kinsmen throng,
Alas for the unicorn!

The unicorn’s horn!
The duke’s clansmen throng,
Alas for the unicorn!

The third verse is extended through the repetition of certain words and phrases. The result is an outburst, which, on each repeat, rises to more extreme heights. This controlled sense of climax hearkens back to the rhetorical devices Dowland brought to bear on his music and which were governed by the understanding that it is a fundamental rule in the delivery of speech ‘to begin at the lowest that you the better aspire to the height of amplyficacion.’²⁰ Dowland exploits this technique of *gradatio (climax)* in his song *Flow My Tears* in a ladder that ascends by degrees, heightening the emotional charge at every step (see also *Come Again! Sweet Love Doth Now Invite* in Ex. 8).

¹⁹ Kyung Soo Moon, ‘Balinese Influences in *Songs from the Chinese*’ (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Texas, 1993).

²⁰ Francis Pilkington in Robert Toft, *Tune Thy Musicke To Thy Hart: The Art of Eloquent Singing in England 1597-1622* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1993), 33/4.

Ex. 13: Dowland, *Flow My Tears*

voice

and teares, and sighes, and groans

Lute

Britten uses the same technique in ‘Dance Song’ when he places the word ‘Alas’ at a higher rung of the emotional ladder on each repeat until the third outburst takes the singer to an extremity of feeling.

Ex. 14: Britten, ‘Dance Song’, *Songs from the Chinese*, vocal part, bars 15 to end

Voice

duke's clans-men throng. A - las for the u-ni-corn A - las for the u-ni-corn A las! A - las!

In conclusion, this paper provides specific evidence that Britten’s *Songs from the Chinese* are imbued with Dowland’s musical rhetoric. I do not believe that Britten was deliberately imitating Dowland’s style of composition. Nor am I suggesting that he was even conscious, in any academic sense, of Dowland’s techniques of musical rhetoric. If these technical aspects are reiterated in Britten’s cycle, it is because the latter naturally understood and absorbed the essence of Dowland’s music: such profound symbiosis was quite likely an unconscious element of Britten’s compositional thinking. The extraordinary aspect of this synergy is that, far from undermining his own distinctive voice, in accommodating these technical attributes from the Elizabethan period Britten actually enhanced his ‘unfailing ability vividly to translate words into musical terms that seem inevitable.’²¹

(Benjamin Dwyer, 15 June 2011)

²¹ Graham Johnson, *Britten, Voice & Piano: Lectures on the Vocal Music of Benjamin Britten* (London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2003), 2.